

New Castle Reviewed: The City Through a Traveler's Lens

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Nowadays, New Castle is a quiet town, full of beautifully preserved buildings and charming gardens. But there was a time when New Castle strove to be more than just a scenic hamlet, indeed, its citizens envisioned New Castle as a center of business and trade.

Founded by the Dutch in 1651, New Castle spent three decades changing hands between the Dutch, Swedes, and English before finally falling under British control in 1682. By the middle of the 18th century, the town was the capital of Delaware, in addition to being the location where all New Castle County residents voted. But despite these advantages, New Castle's regional prominence would not last. This summer, I was tasked with investigating when its decline began, by examining travel journals of those who visited New Castle during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Travel journals can be an excellent source for information on a town, since they often include comparisons to other towns that the writer just visited. That being said, travelers are not always fair in their judgements. One such example is found in the journals of William Wood Thackara, a Philadelphia man whose account of New Castle reflects an unusual amount of bias. He writes that it is the worst town on the Delaware, and that its citizens, "seldom appear to have anything to do... but to hang about the corners of their streets, to collect and retail the news, and kill time." Biased reviews aside, I have managed to compile a number of fairer accounts of New Castle from many different perspectives, as illustrated by the map behind me. The graphic shows the hometowns of those included in my research. Purple pins denote those from England, while the rest are marked in blue. While it is clear many came from the British Isles, there are also those from places that would have been exotic to a New Castle resident, such as Venezuela and Martinique. Additionally, these travelers practiced a variety of professions. My research includes accounts of New Castle from a doctor, a revolutionary, a scientist, and even a spy. When viewed together, these sources help document the fortunes of New Castle in the colonial and early national period, as it fought for prominence in the Mid-Atlantic region.

The story begins around 1750, at a time when New Castle was beginning to lose ground to Wilmington. This is reflected in the words of Peter Kalm, a Swedish scientist, who in 1748 was sent to America to identify any plant species that could be successfully introduced to Sweden. While on the trip, he passed through New Castle, and his review of the town was not exactly glowing. He wrote that, "we passed by Newcastle, a little town on the western shore of the river Delaware...But its trade can by no means be compared with the Philadelphia trade. The country about Philadelphia and farther up, being highly cultivated, and the people bringing all their goods to that place, Newcastle must always be inferior to it." A similar account comes from Andrew Burnaby, an English clergyman who visited New Castle in 1760 and noted that, "It is the capital of the three lower counties, but a place of very little consideration; there are no public buildings that deserve to be taken notice of. The church, court-houses, and markethouse, are

undeserving of attention.” Up through the 1780s, this pattern continues, as descriptions range from merely apathetic to extremely critical.

Luckily, this did not last, as the 1790s saw a reversal of fortunes for the town. More ships were going in and out of Philadelphia, and this meant more business more New Castle as a pitstop for ships entering and leaving the city. As a result, those who visited during this period wrote glowing reviews that stand in stark contrast to those penned only a few decades before. One such example is found in the journals of Mederic Moreau de St. Mery, a lawyer from the French colony of Martinique. His review of the town was extremely positive. “Newcastle had declined” he admitted, “but it has bloomed again. New Castle is a stop for all deep-water ships sailing from Philadelphia, in order to take aboard their poultry and other fresh provisions. If the weather seems unfavorable to let them get well beyond the Delaware Capes, they can stay there safely awaiting a propitious moment... The halt at Newcastle is so much a custom that a vessel is not considered ready to leave until it has come down to Newcastle with a pilot. It is at this anchorage that a captain joins his ship when he has completed in Philadelphia all necessary details.” Clearly, Moreau de St. Mery thought highly of New Castle, and his opinions are corroborated in accounts by sailors like the ones he described. One such man is John W. Godfrey. His journal includes a review of his time in New Castle, and before I read it, I want to take a minute to talk about the journal, because working with it was one of my favorite parts of the internship. Going into this summer, I had no experience with archival materials. So when I approached Mr. Grom about some travel journals at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that I thought would be helpful to my research, I didn’t know what to expect. As it turns out, not only did he agree to a trip into the city, but he also volunteered to come with me, in order to help navigate the process of using archival materials. This was an amazing experience. I was able to add some meaningful descriptions of New Castle to my research, while also learning how to use archival collections. Additionally, it was just really cool to interact with documents written over two hundred years ago, such as the journal behind me. So Godfrey was the captain of a ship departing from Philadelphia, and he did as Moreau described, joining his ship and crew in New Castle after spending extra time in Philadelphia. His account from the day he spent in New Castle indicates just how important traffic from Philadelphia was for the town’s economy. He remarks that he, “Left this place [Philadelphia] at about a quarter past 4 o’clock on Board the Rising sun packet of New Castle, to over take the Brig Diana, which we found at anchor opposite New Castle. Next morning at about ½ past 6 - went on shore. I took Breakfast + then having occasion for some Dollars, called on William Lees + got silver - We spent the morning agreeably - Dined + drank a few cheerful glasses, the afternoon being very windy + cold for the season. [Then] Went on Board the Diana at 6 o’clock.” Even though he only spent a day in New Castle, Godfrey made several purchases that would have benefited the local economy. When one considers that these kinds of interactions were occurring frequently during the 1790s, it’s no wonder the descriptions of New Castle were so positive. The town was enjoying a resurgence in activity, and outsiders noticed.

Unfortunately, this period of growth did not last, as New Castle’s economy slowed once again. It would be easy to point to the construction of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal in 1829, or the Philadelphia-Wilmington-Baltimore Railroad in 1837, as the reasons for the town’s failures. Indeed, both of these transportation routes bypassed New Castle, and certainly did not help the town. But these were only the final nails in the coffin for New Castle’s hopes to become a regional power, as a look at travel journals from the beginning of the 19th century proves that New Castle’s decline started much sooner. One negative review comes from Benjamin Henry

Latrobe, the architect who designed the US Capitol Building. He spent significant time in New Castle creating a regrading plan for the town, but he did not think highly of it. "Newcastle cannot be a commercial town while Philadelphia exists. As soon as a merchant acquires capital, the field of Newcastle is too small for him and he moves away." Clearly, New Castle was stuck in Philadelphia's shadow. Similar accounts are also found in the 1810s. William Amphlett, while arriving in the U.S. for the first time, noted that, "Newcastle is in sight,—the first town we behold: it makes but a poor appearance from our vessel; nor is its situation desirable, except for a river trade, and as a harbour for pilot-boats. Wilmington comes next,—a place of more consequence." At this point, the town had not only slipped behind Philadelphia, but Wilmington as well.

Clearly, the first quarter of the 19th century was not kind to New Castle, and there are a number of reasons why. Less ships sailing into Philadelphia meant less business for New Castle. And the Embargo Act of 1807 spelled disaster for all of American trade. Combine this with the fact that New Castle's harbor fell into disrepair around 1810, and it's clear that New Castle's problems began long before new transportation networks in the 1830s cut the town off from regional trade. In under a hundred years, New Castle had gone from a town with ambitious goals and a promising future to one that was small and sleepy, and this is how it would remain up to the present day.

But why does this all matter? This was something I had to grapple with while completing my research - after all, New Castle is one of many sleepy towns that once strove for greatness. The answer came to me during one of the internship's seminars. This was a time when all the interns would meet for a discussion facilitated by Mr. Grom centered around texts he had assigned. It was at one of these seminars that the subjectivity of history was brought up, and it was then that I realized that all the accounts I had collected did in fact teach an important lesson.

Across the 20th and 21st centuries, New Castle has often presented its past in an extremely positive manner. Above all, the beauty of the town and its architecture have been the highlights. Anyone who has been to A Day in Old New Castle can attest to this. And it's true, the scenic homes and gardens are a large part of the town and its history. But trying to paint the history of New Castle without the times when the town struggled, without the negative views from outsiders, creates an unfinished story. However, New Castle is not the only place where the past is shown in this way. We like to think of history as objective, after all, it's the facts. In fact, it is one of the most subjective areas of study. For better or worse, whoever is telling the story can manipulate it, by choosing which facts to include, and which time periods to focus on. This is unavoidable - I had to do this just to create this presentation. But it is crucial that whenever you are interacting with history, whether it be through a book or a presentation like this one, you ask questions. Why were these sources prioritized over others? What narrative is the author trying to create? And who is being left out of the picture? It may not always be an easy practice, but your understanding of the past will be better because of it.

Title	Date	Author	Page	Link	Source	Notes	View	Quote
The journal of John Fontaine; an Irish Huguenot son in Spain and Virginia, 1710-1719	1716	John Fontaine	119	https://tinyurl.com/y3bzh2pd	The journal of John Fontaine; an Irish Huguenot son in Spain and Virginia, 1710-1719	Huguenot whose dad fled to England, served on expedition across the Blue Ridge in VA	Little to say; impressed by houses but notes lack of trade	“at one of the clock came to Newcastle. After dinner walked about the town. There are a great many good brick houses, but a place of no trade, tho’ situated upon the Delaware River. We remained here all this day and were well entertained and lodged.”
Hamilton’s Itinerarium... from May to September, 1744	1744	Alexander Hamilton	27-28 in pdf, 13 in book	https://tinyurl.com/yyt85wom	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Scottish immigrant who became a doctor in MD	Notes how old the houses are (already)	“This town stands upon stony ground, just upon the water, there being from thence a large prospect eastward, towards the Bay of Delaware and the Province of the Jerseys. The houses are chiefly brick, built after the Dutch model, the town having been originally founded and inhabited by the Dutch, when it belonged to New York government. It consists chiefly of one great street, which makes an elbow at right angles. A great many of the houses are old and crazy. There are in the town two public buildings; viz., a courthouse and church.”

Travels into North America, V. 1	1748	Pehr Kalm, tr. Adolph Benson	34 in pdf, 21 in book	https://tinyurl.com/y2kuct6m	American Journeys	Swedish scientist sent to America by govt. to bring back seeds/plants	Notes advantageous position but says that Philly is still somehow ahead/little trade	“In the dawn of the evening we passed by Newcastle, a little town on the western shore of the river Delaware... The Dutch are said to have been the first founders of this place, which is therefore reckoned the most ancient in the country, even more ancient than Philadelphia. But its trade can by no means be compared with the Philadelphia trade, though its situation has more advantages in several respects... But the country about Philadelphia and farther up, being highly cultivated, and the people bringing all their goods to that place, Newcastle must always be inferior to it.”
Travels through the middle settlements in North-America in the years 1759 and 1760	1760	Andrew Burnaby	117 in pdf, 92 in book	https://tinyurl.com/y343y5fq	Travels through the middle settlements in North-America in the years 1759 and 1760.	English clergymen, from a well-to-do family	Very dismissive of town, doesn't talk trade but says buildings are ugly/not worth noting	“Newcastle is situated upon Delaware river... It is the capital of the three lower counties, but a place of very little consideration; there are scarcely more than an hundred houses in it, and no public buildings that deserve to be taken notice of. The church, presbyterian and quakers meeting houses, court-houses, and markethouse, are almost

								equally bad, and undeserving of attention.”
Journal of a French traveller in the colonies, 1765	1765	Anon.	50 in pdf, 77 in book	https://tinyurl.com/yypyzvzrz	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Unknown French agent spying on colonies	Notes the town’s beauty + stature (2nd most key to Philly)	“from Mr. Chews to New Castle on the Delawar. this is a pretty town Consisting of about 500 Dwelling houses. it is looked upon as the next to philadelphia In the province. it is about 30 from this last, S. W., on the north side of said river. there was two Kings Fregates off[f] the town to visit the vessels going in and out therby to hinder foreign trade.”
Travels in North-America : in the years 1780-81-82	1780-82	Marquis de Chastellux (trans. George Grieve)	239 in pdf, 215 in book	https://tinyurl.com/y5aphejv	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Major-General in army under Rochambeau	Very indifferent on town, describes it as small	“As you approach New-castle, the country becomes more gay. This little capital of a small district, contains twenty-five or thirty houses, some of which are pretty enough.”
The New Democracy in America: Travels of Francisco de Miranda	1783	Francisco de Miranda	39-40	https://tinyurl.com/yx9s83kl	Spanish: Viage por los Estados Unidos de la America del Norte, año de 1783-84	Venezualen revolutionary whose time in the U.S. came after fleeing from Spanish	Favorable impression of town, no strong emotions	“At seven o’clock in the morning of the twentieth we set sail in pursuit of our course and at ten o’clock anchored, for lack of wind, at the town of New Castle, fifteen miles up river. The passengers, except for the women, went ashore and were provided with an excellent dinner at the tavern of Israel Israel. The building that houses

								<p>this tavern was erected by a Dutchman and predates Philadelphia, as does this town, which was the first European settlement on this river. After dinner we took a walk around the town, which has a pretty location, good houses, and about seventy inhabitants.”</p>
<p>Moreau de St. Mery’s AMerican Journey 1793-1798</p>	<p>1794</p>	<p>Moreau de St. Mery</p>	<p>96-97 in French, 86-87 in English</p>	<p>French: https://tinyurl.com/y2h2svjm English: https://tinyurl.com/y5fgpyy6</p>	<p>French: Voyage aux États-Unis de l’Amérique, 1793-1798</p>	<p>Prominent lawyer in French Carribbean, exiled to U.S. during Reign of Terror</p>	<p>Lengthy description of town; noted importance for ships from Philly</p>	<p>“We reached Newcastle at half past nine. The Court of Justice was assembled here. We had the curiosity to go and see the tribunal in session. One would not know how to express in words the majesty of the place... whatever might be the simplicity of the temple consecrated to justice, it wakens always in the man who loves it ideas of respect. Newcastle, one of the oldest cities of the state of Delaware, of which it has also been the capital, is built on the right bank of the river of the same name. It is thirty miles from Philadelphia by land, and forty by water. The houses are brick, and about eighty in number, but not adjoining... Newcastle had declined, but it has bloomed again, and</p>

								when its break-water (for whose construction a toll has been levied) is completed, vessels can lie there safely in the winter. New Castle is a stop for all deep-water ships sailing from Philadelphia, in order to take aboard their poultry and other fresh provisions. If the weather seems unfavorable to let them get well beyond the Delaware Capes, they can stay there safely awaiting a propitious moment, and can replace the provisions consumed during the wait. The halt at Newcastle is so much a custom that a vessel is not considered ready to leave until it has come down to Newcastle with a pilot. It is at this anchorage that a captain joins his ship when he has completed in Philadelphia all necessary details.
John W. Godfrey Journal	1795	John W. Godfrey	1-2	https://tinyurl.com/y5tr9e8 (Finding Aid)	Collections at HSP	PA man on ship to London, embarking on a tour of Europe for his job (land company)	Spends day in NC before departing, shows how town was dependent on such travelers	“Left this place [Philadelphia] at about a quarter past 4 o’clock on Board the Rising sun packet of New Castle, to over take the Brig Diana, which we found at anchor opposite New Castle. Next morning at about ½ past 6 - went on

								shore. I took Breakfast + then having occasion for some Dollars, called on William Lees + got 36 ??? in silver - We spent the morning agreeably - Dined + drank a few cheerful glasses, the afternoon being very windy + cold for the season. Went on Board the Diana at 6 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon - about 8 had a good Dish of Coffee after which spend the evening until about 11 o'clock in singing + merriment, much to the enjoyment + satisfaction of the Company."
Travels in America 100 Years Ago: being notes and reminiscences	1796	Thomas Twining	14	https://tinyurl.com/y3c358us	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Grandfather was founder of Twinings, worked as an accountant for East India Comp.	Noted its advantageous position between sea and PA, predicts pop. growth	"We passed several small islands; the principal of which was Delaware Island, and the considerable town of Newcastle, on the western shore, formerly called Stockholm, having been founded by the Swedes, and later New Amsterdam, upon its passing into the possession of the Dutch. It is considered the oldest European settlement on the Delaware. Its situation, about half-way between Philadelphia and the sea, is evidently very advantageous, and must

								insure it a large share of the commercial prosperity of the capital. It may be safely predicted that its population will increase more during the next twenty years than in the one hundred and fifty which have elapsed since its establishment.”
Travels Through the United States of North America	1797	duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt (trans. Henry Neuman	53 in book, 65 on website for French vers., 538 in English vers.	French: https://tinyurl.com/y6puk5x3 English: https://tinyurl.com/y37zqune	French: Voyage dans les Etats-Unis, v. 6 English: Travels Through the United States, v. 3	Aristocrat/social reformer who fled France during Rev., returned in later life	Long description, notes NC’s importance for foreign trade to and from Philly	“Newcastle is composed of seventy houses, some of which are brick, and are built adjacent to each other: the wide streets and grass plots give it the appearance of an English village. Being the county town, it contains the sessions house and the prison. The town is built on the Delaware; it does not, however, carry on any direct foreign trade, but confines itself to the coasting trade with Philadelphia... A fund having been raised by way of lottery, sanctioned by the state, for the purpose of building quays at Newcastle, that place now affords shelter to vessels in the winter, and begins to rise from the state of decay into which it had sunk... The frequent communication between

							<p>Philadelphia and Baltimore, and the great traffic between the two cities, have occasioned the establishment of a more speedy means of conveyance of goods and passengers, than by the ordinary land and water carriage.</p> <p>Four small sloops constantly sail to and from Newcastle and Philadelphia. Regular stages convey the passengers to French-Town, on the Elk-River, about twelve miles distant from Newcastle. Goods are carried there in carts. Other sloops sail down the Elk-River, which empties itself into the Chesapeak, eighteen miles from French-Town, from whence they proceed to Baltimore...</p> <p>Newcastle is the true point from which all the Philadelphia ships take their departure. When they are laden, they drop down thither with their pilot, and take in their poultry and vegetables, where the captains who remain at Philadelphia to settle their accounts at the custom-house join them by land, and from whence they sail with the first fair wind."</p>
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Peter Adolph Grotjahn Memoir	1805	Peter Adolph Grotjahn	131-132	https://tinyurl.com/y5crzp6s (Finding Aid)	Collections at APS	German immigrant to PA who became prominent merchant and local Dem. leader	Stays at NC while waiting for ship repairs, shows town's role (and lack thereof) in trade	“We started again early in September 1805 but the wind blowing a gale, we met with an accident which nearly frustrated our voyage. After leaving New Castle ... we found a large fleet of outward bound vessels at anchor, waiting for the abatement of the gale. Our pilot, however, thought his skill sufficient to steer us through the fleet... at this critical moment, the schooner, not obeying the helm, missed stays, and ran head foremost into the stern of large black painted brig... Our vessel it appeared has sustained damage in her hull... it became necessary to send her back [to Philadelphia] for repairs... I concluded to stay at New Castle and await her return.”
Travels through the United States...including an account of passages betwixt America and Britain	1806	John Melish	156 & 158 in pdf, 135-136 in book	https://tinyurl.com/y4sns24	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Scottish map maker who produced the first map of US to the Pacific. (settled in Philly)	Indifferent view of NC, but includes her in list of important towns	“Newcastle, where we stopped, is a small town containing about 200 houses, some of them handsome. It carries on a considerable trade, principally in wheat. Having taken an early breakfast, at a very good tavern, we set out in the stage for the head of Elk river...

								<p>The state of Delaware is considerably improved, and, besides many towns and villages of inferior note, contains several of considerable size. The most important are,—Wilmington, already mentioned, a large thriving town, built on the plan of Philadelphia, consisting of 500 houses, a court-house, jail, and four places for public worship; it carries on a very considerable trade. Newcastle has been noticed. DOVER is the seat of government, and contains about 600 inhabitants.”</p>
<p>The Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1799-1820</p>	1806	Benjamin Henry Latrobe	35-42 in journal, 27 in book	https://tinyurl.com/y4uhzby8	New Castle, Delaware: A Walk Through Time	British immigrant who became foremost architect in early 1800s U.S.	Greatly disliked town and its people. (Talks about George Read II)	<p>“New Castle is the Gravesend of Philadelphia. Of course the usual conveniences for the accommodation of seafaring men are found in plenty and of the coarsest sort. And as a little country town it has all the petty scandal, curiosity, envy and hatred which distinguishes little towns all over the world.. There are half a dozen good natured men besides in this place. ... None of them were ever suspected of giving away anything in charity, or acquiring any thing by</p>

								their genius. But to do no wrong in Newcastle is praise worthy. It is no wonder indeed that talent and worth should be rare here. Newcastle cannot be a commercial town while Philadelphia exists. As soon as a merchant acquires capital, the field of Newcastle is too small for him and he moves away.”
The emigrant’s directory to the Western States of North America	1818	William Amphlett	34	https://tinyurl.com/yysghxz9	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Emigrant from Liverpool w/ his whole family, wrote the book as a guide	Does not think highly of town, says Wilm. is more important	“Newcastle is in sight,—the first town we behold: it makes but a poor appearance from our vessel; nor is its situation desirable, except for a river trade, and as a harbour 55 for pilot-boats. Wilmington comes next,—a place of more consequence, situated on the Brandywine Creek.”
An excursion through the United States and Canada during the years 1822-23	1822	William N. Blane	23	https://tinyurl.com/y5qvcby3	Library of Congress, American Notes: Travel in America	Son of rich Scotsman who owned English manor	Notes towns ideal location as a transport. hub-better than Frenchtown	“The Delaware below Philadelphia is very wide, but the general marshiness of the banks renders the prospect much less beautiful than above the city. Thirty-three miles from Philadelphia, we stopped at Newcastle, which, though a small town, is a very important one, there being no other on the Delaware so near the

									tide-waters of Chesapeak Bay”
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